

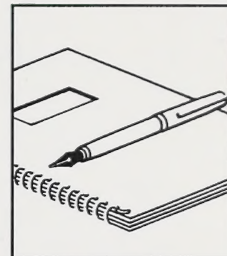
# Heritage Notes

Planning for Heritage Resources

Research and Documentation

## How to Research Historic Houses

Donald G. Wetherell



Number 10



Lynwood cottage, the Edmonton home of the Harkness family. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4550, c. 1900.

### Introduction

One popular method of preserving the built environment in Canada is through the designation of buildings. The term “designation” means that a heritage structure has been recognized as significant for certain reasons. These may include its age, its architectural style, or perhaps a notable architect or occupant. It is then protected by whichever level of government designated it: national, provincial or municipal. In Alberta, buildings are designated by the province under the Historical Resources Act, as well as by some municipal governments. While applicants should refer to the specific guidelines for each program, it is likely that all of them will demand an assessment of the building’s

historical importance or significance. This *Heritage Note* provides a brief historical background on houses in Alberta as well as guidance on researching houses to determine their significance.

### What Makes a House “Significant”?

Among the most common reasons for designating a building are that it is:

- a landmark,
- old, one-of-a-kind or rare,
- especially well-constructed or designed,
- a fine representation of a particular architectural style, or,
- associated with important events or individuals.



**Alberta**  
COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT  
Historic Sites and Archives Service



Although each of these reasons is important, a combination of several, or all of them, will help make designation of a building more likely.

These factors are important indicators of a building's significance, but in the case of houses, they are often difficult to apply. In comparison to other historic buildings, houses have special characteristics. The great majority were not designed by architects, and were built and used by ordinary people. Most houses do not exhibit a particular architectural style, and many have been remodelled extensively over the years. Moreover, while their yards and physical surroundings are central to their appearance and function, in many cases these too have been radically altered.

In spite of these difficulties, the preservation of houses is important. As the most common type of building that relates directly to day-to-day life, they reflect people's aspirations, taste and quality of life as do no other structures.

Ordinary houses, built in the thousands in cities, towns and on farms, express clearly the social thought of the time and the assumptions of average people. They can illustrate society from the bottom (or the middle) upwards, instead of only from the top down. If only the mansions of the rich or the houses of the famous are preserved, an opportunity to understand the whole of society is missed. The homes of working people, farmers, and the urban middle class reveal the way that houses contributed to the texture of daily life. The

layout and fixtures of their rooms as well as their outside appearance reflected popularly held views about the family, social life and the place of the individual in society. Their appearance was also influenced by existing building technology and available methods of heating, lighting and sanitation. For example, by 1900 plumbers began using a "single stack system," which meant that the bathroom was placed above, or adjacent to, the kitchen so that all the plumbing would be connected in a single system. Thus, the technological history of the province as well as social conditions such as class and occupation, ethnicity, and gender can all have a bearing on the way houses look. And given the diversity of climate and landscape found in different parts of the province, further variations in design emerged over time, resulting in the variety of house design that we find in this province.

As a result, the significance of a particular house cannot be judged by applying a rigid formula. It depends on when, where, how, and by whom it was built and how these factors influenced its appearance. Consequently, a single important attribute would rarely be sufficient to define a house as significant to the built environment of the whole province, although it might be significant at a local level. The greater the combination of attributes in a single house, the more likely is its wider significance, and the possibility of designation.

A heritage building may be "designated" for reasons of its age, architectural significance or a famous occupant. This modest frame house in Lacombe (left) was designated a Provincial Historic Resource in 1977 because Roland Michener, Governor General of Canada from 1967-1974, was born here in 1900.

Showing pride of ownership, this finely maintained house won a prize in 1910 offered by the Edmonton Horticultural Society for the best decorated house front (right). Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4725.







Large kitchens, such as this one in the Polet home in Villeneuve, Alberta in 1906, were soon replaced with smaller and more “efficient” kitchens. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Archives Collection, A7654.

### a. Interior versus Exterior Appearance

Traditionally, the exterior appearance of a building has been seen as the most important element in judging its historical significance. And as the face that a building puts to the street and to society, exterior appearance does matter. For instance, the mansions of the rich projected a sense of success, permanence, and tradition that reflected both their owners’ social and economic status and their aspirations. By contrast, the single storey and one and-a-half storey bungalows, so popular in Alberta between about 1910 and 1930, used designs such as a low profile, wide eaves and natural materials like brick, stucco, and shingles to promote a particular ideal of “hominess” and the value of the family.

The interior arrangement of space and its decoration are also a significant part of the history of any building, but they are especially important in houses. Indeed, the significance of a house often lies as much in its interior design as in its exterior appearance. Kitchen design, for instance, was related directly to

contemporary understanding of sanitation and to beliefs and attitudes about the role of women in the home. For example, by about 1910, the idea that homemaking was a “profession” led to smaller kitchens which imitated the efficient layout of a factory. Similarly, living rooms reflected a particular view of the family and the way in which it spent its leisure hours and its time together. The use of beamed ceilings and fireplaces in these rooms, for example, was believed to demonstrate and encourage family togetherness and stability.

Given these concerns, a bungalow from the 1920s, for example, with original fixtures and appliances, and with its original layout and decoration unchanged, might well be a significant structure. Original fixtures have often been replaced (especially in kitchens and bathrooms, with good reason). When they are present, however, along with the original layout and decoration, the whole can reveal how social priorities and assumptions found expression and shaped the design of houses.



The grand home of pioneer, businessman and M.L.A. Cornelius Hiebert in Didsbury, Alberta was designated a Provincial Historic Resource in 1983. This designation recognized the significance of Hiebert's contributions to the community, as well as the architectural merits of the house itself.



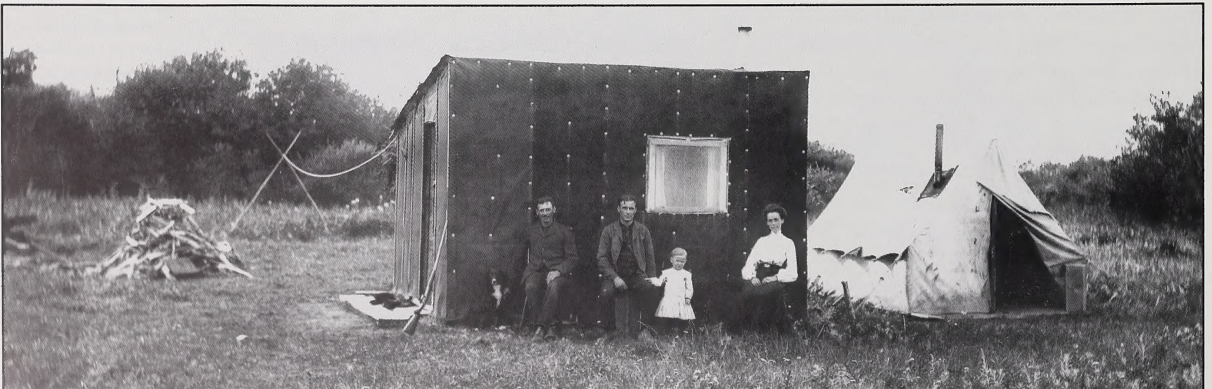
#### **b. Historically Important Individuals**

Traditionally, a common reason for designating a house is that some notable individual has lived there. This has often meant prominent political or business figures, although some attention has been paid to writers, artists, labour leaders, and scientists, among others.

This measure of significance is sometimes imprecisely applied because it is not the house that is being commemorated but the person who lived in it. In some cases, this is valid, but many times it is only a roundabout way of commemorating a historically important

individual and has little to do with the built environment. A famous person is usually not well known because of the house he or she lived in. If, however, the exterior and interior design of the house reflects the aspirations, character and life of the individual and his or her class, ethnicity and occupation, its significance would be greater. It can be a means of learning about that person and the society he or she lived in and the forces that shaped the look and construction of the house.

Many settlers' first home was a tent, then a shack, and as circumstances improved, a permanent house. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4510, not dated.





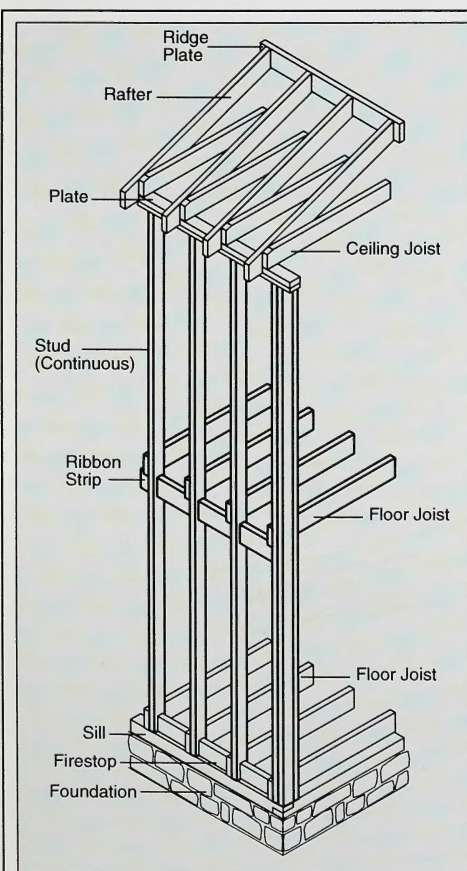
### c. Construction Technology and Materials

In addition to social influences or architectural qualities, different types of construction technology and building materials are also significant in the history of housing.

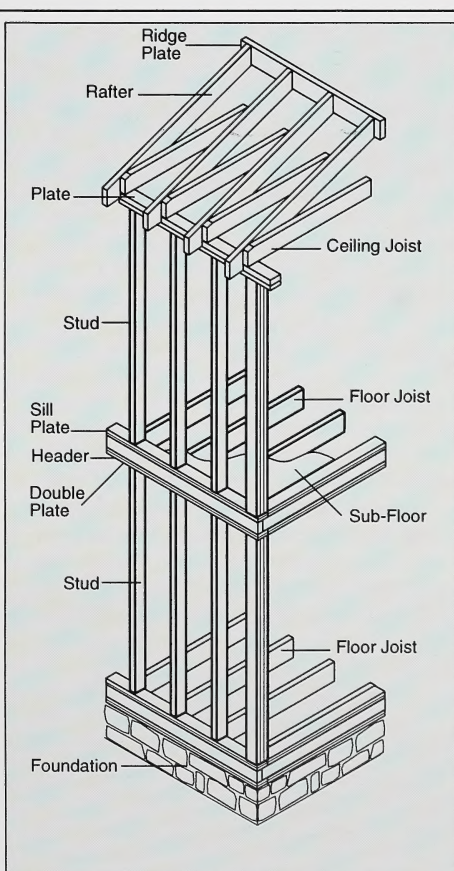
Initially, houses in wooded parts of the province were built of logs, reflecting the fact that many early settlers lacked capital and that milled lumber was scarce and costly. A variety of building techniques were used with log. Some indicate the ethnic origin and traditions of the builder. Ukrainian builders, for example, usually finished log buildings inside and out with a smooth coating of mud plaster. Anglo-

Canadian settlers, in contrast, usually left the exterior face of the logs exposed. Yet, in many cases, the use of a particular method of construction was simply a practical response to frontier conditions and the immediate need for shelter. In other cases, early houses in the province used materials ranging from sod to milled lumber. In all of these instances, building materials and the way they were used arose from the social and economic conditions of the area.

Pioneer shacks, log, and sod houses were soon replaced with more elaborate buildings. While stone was used in some parts of the province, and houses made from locally manufactured brick could be found in most places, the great



**BALLOON FRAMING**



**PLATFORM FRAMING**

"Balloon framing" was faster and cheaper than earlier wood construction techniques. Two storey houses were framed with continuous vertical members, from ground to roof. Later, builders turned to platform framing, which made more efficient use of labour by constructing one floor at a time. This method was also more fire resistant than balloon framing.



majority of houses were built of milled lumber. Balloon framing was widely used because it was faster and cheaper than other wood construction techniques or than building with stone. Later, builders turned to platform framing, a system which made more efficient use of labour and material. Alternatively, many houses were purchased from catalogues: the lumber, millwork and sometimes even the mechanical infrastructure came packaged and ready for assembly. When finished, these houses looked the same as those built using conventional construction techniques, but they were less costly and represented a solution to the shortages of skilled labour in a rapidly growing society. They also reflected an expanding mechanization and standardization in building technology, design and construction.

The use of different sorts of materials and methods of construction provides evidence of the way the built environment was formed in response to basic technological, economic, and cultural conditions. The craftsmanship applied to houses reflects the pace of building and the standards possible at the time or demanded by purchasers. Further, the application of different materials in different parts of the province illustrates the impact of regional forces on housing.

#### **d. Site and Location**

A crucial factor in understanding the historical context of houses involves recognition of how they were landscaped and placed on a lot, and the way they related to adjacent spaces and

buildings. Houses have never existed in isolation and have always altered the landscape to some degree. The effect has been most dramatic in cities and towns, where a wholly new landscape and sense of place were created by the grouping of houses along streets and in subdivisions. On farms the house was part of the farmyard, thus forming an overall economic unit. This had a different impact on the landscape, and the significance of a farm house is enhanced if its relationship to the rest of the farmyard and its buildings is still intact.

Setting, however, is perhaps the most difficult aspect of a building's significance to analyze because it has so often been dramatically altered. Urbanization, the move towards larger farms, and changes in transportation have worked the most extensive change throughout the province, but changing fashions in gardens and yard design have also created major change at a more local and individual level. Streetscapes have also changed because of fire, demolition and the construction of new "in-fill" houses on older streets. As well, the natural processes of growth and decay affect both streets and yards. Nonetheless, for a particular house, original fences, trees, garden layout, and yard structures like garages and garden buildings demonstrate the way that the house related to its surroundings and how life within the home reached out to involve other areas and the community. The house itself often employed design features, such as verandahs or glassed doors, to create a bridge between the outdoors and the interior of the house.

As on 125th Street in Edmonton in 1913, the construction of subdivisions completely changed the Alberta landscape. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B5007.







Verandahs were a bridge between the interior of the house and the outside.  
Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4546, not dated.

The way in which outbuildings related to the house and the manner in which the yard was planted and space was separated were expressions both of personal needs and of community. They remain vital signposts in understanding the context of the house and should be recognized as holding significance in the preservation of the built environment. In this sense, original garden and yard layout, streets and subdivisions, and farmyards which have been relatively unaltered, provide a physical reference for the house in its most basic context and should be recognized in conjunction with the house as significant historical resources.

### **What Type of Information is Needed and Where is it Found?**

Researching the history of a house involves searching for two broad types of information: that which is specific to a particular house (called “site specific”) and contextual information. The actual sources used in research are also divided into two categories:

primary and secondary. Primary sources are original documents from the time that the historical events took place. An example is the building permit granted for a house. Secondary sources are those written after the event. An example of this is a book written by a historian about the history of house design, such as Thelma B. Dennis, *Albertans Built: Aspects of Housing in Rural Alberta to 1920*.

Site specific information provides details about when the house was built, what it looked like from the outside and how it was laid out inside, who designed and constructed it, how much it cost and what sort of materials were used to build it. It also gives information about who owned it and when, personalities and events associated specifically with it, how it has been renovated or changed, and how it was landscaped and the way it related to adjacent buildings.

Answers to all of these questions provide a composite picture of the history of the house. In almost all cases, this information cannot be





Photographs, such as this one of a drawing room in Edmonton, provide information available from no other source about housing.

Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4534, 1902.

found in a single source. Instead, it must be gathered from a variety of sources. This is time-consuming work, and while most of these questions can be answered, some cannot since sources of information no longer exist. In general, houses located in villages, towns and cities are easier to research because greater government regulation (such as the need for building permits) provides a source of documentation not available for farm houses.

Site specific information is the basic building block in researching the history of a house. The first step is to check the appropriate Land Titles Office for relevant land records. Records for land south of and including township 34 (just south of Innisfail) are held in Calgary, while those for land north of and including township 35 are in Edmonton. A "historical title search," ordered through one of these Land Titles Offices, can provide details about the owner of the house (who may not have lived in it), the size of the lot, and all mortgages and liens ever registered against the title. Mortgage details sometimes also allow one to infer when the house was constructed. This is bare, but essential, information.

Material found in tax rolls and assessment and building permit records is equally terse, but provides additional information not found in the Land Titles sources. Assessment records will track the taxation of the land and the value

of its improvements. If they exist, building permit records may give precise information about when the house was built, who designed and built it, and subsequent renovations. Although some local governments may still have some of these records, it is more likely that they will be held in archives. The City of Edmonton Archives holds some of these records for Edmonton, while in Calgary, the City of Calgary Archives as well as the Glenbow Library and Archives, hold historical records. The Provincial Archives of Alberta has many records relating to taxation and assessment from communities throughout the province. For rural land, homestead records –also held at the Provincial Archives–may provide some useful details as well.

The gathering of information from archival sources about land ownership, taxation, and regulation will often be slow, but it will almost always be accurate. Of course, not all construction required permits, nor did owners always faithfully obtain all the permits that were required. Information gained from these sources should therefore be supplemented by other material such as municipal directories and telephone books. Most archives and some libraries will have at least some of these records. However, caution is needed when using directories because they were not always updated quickly, and sometimes they continued to use out-of-date information until new material was available. A variety of historical maps available in many archives may provide additional information. Insurance maps give the most specific information about buildings.

Historical photographs held by archives, local museums and some libraries are of particular relevance in researching the history of a house. They will give information that can be found nowhere else. Most archives cross index their photo collections by name/place/subject/event. Other photos might be found in the hands of descendants of early owners of the house. Such people should be interviewed as part of the research, and they should also be asked for photos. The biographical information provided by a local history might be a guide to selecting individuals for interviewing, as well for general



---

information about the family that owned the house and about the evolution of the community.

It is commonly suggested in research guidelines that newspapers are a good source of information on the history of buildings. Almost every town had a newspaper, and for public buildings, costly houses, or houses owned by highly prominent figures, newspapers may provide some information. Newspapers, however, require a great deal of time to use, and, even in small towns, they contain few references about houses. If newspapers are used, most are available on microfilm at the Legislature Library in Edmonton (the best collection in Alberta) or at other archives and libraries.

Two additional sources of valuable information are often overlooked. First, never be reluctant to use the house itself as a primary research source. A careful visual examination of the house (both outside and inside) often holds important clues about its original design. And secondly, try to find and talk to people who have lived in the house or who have worked on remodelling or renovating it. They will often

be able to provide clues about the original materials and construction.

Determining what was typical many years ago can be difficult given the great changes that have taken place in the built environment. One technique that can be used is to compare your house with existing structures in the community. This can be done visually by walking or driving around to see what exists. A more precise comparison can be made by using the Historic Sites and Archives Service Inventory of Historic Buildings, located at Old St. Stephen's College, 8820 - 112 Street in Edmonton. This is a computerized database of historic buildings in the province. It can be searched on a variety of topics, such as construction materials, date of construction, design and other information. For example, you can discover how many brick houses built before 1920 exist in a certain community. As well as helping determine how many similar buildings may still exist, the inventory provides valuable information about each building.

These specific details need to be supplemented by contextual information which brings an understanding of the social, economic and



Decorative millwork, such as on the house on the left, was often mass produced and sold by lumber yards. Catalogues and advertisements contain details on such materials, as do secondary sources about the history of house design. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4582, 1903.



This photograph of the LaPrelle residence in Edmonton beautifully captures the seasonal context of the house. Photo: Provincial Archives of Alberta, Ernest Brown Collection, B4530, not dated.



architectural importance of the house. It allows the researcher to “place” the house in the history of the society which built and used it. This contextual information is to be found in both primary and secondary sources. For example, a general understanding of the historical role of women in society will enable one to look critically at those aspects of the house which reflected attitudes about women. No site specific source is likely to tell a researcher this information. Rather, it is found by reading primary sources like writings about design, family life, and social organization from the same time period as the house, as well as in more recent secondary sources about the topic.

While finding site specific information is often painstaking, contextual information is often easier to find, especially in secondary sources. General histories of the province or the region, as well as articles in journals such as *Alberta History*, are the best secondary sources with which to start. These, however, then need to be supplemented with further primary and

secondary sources. In this respect, the only workable advice is to spend time reading in libraries and archives. The bibliography that follows, Keys to Further Information, contains references to books about Alberta’s history and the history of housing which will be useful starting points.

## Conclusion

Assessing the significance of a house involves understanding both its individual history and the historical context in which it was built. This is no different than the way that we assess the historical significance of any other part of our built environment. Yet, the unique qualities that houses possess require a different sensibility. Their setting, their design, the materials from which they were built and the way in which they were constructed are a special demonstration of the great variety and nuance in people’s everyday lives. These qualities also illustrate the way that social and economic concerns were interconnected and found expression in the built environment.



---

## KEYS TO FURTHER INFORMATION

---

### General Sources

---

Calgary, City of Calgary Archives. *Research Your House at the City of Calgary Archives*.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Historical Land Use Research at the City of Calgary Archives*.

These pamphlets outline research sources in the City of Calgary Archives.

Friesen, Gerald. *The Canadian Prairies: A History*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984.

A history of the three prairie provinces. As well as containing references to Alberta, it provides general historical context for many topics.

Palmer, Howard with Tamara Palmer. *Alberta: A New History*. Edmonton: Hurtig Publishers, 1990.

A general history which provides information on Alberta's development and historical context.

### Alberta History

The journal of the Historical Society of Alberta has over the years published a wide range of articles on Alberta's history. Available by subscription from the Historical Society of Alberta, Box 4035, Station C, Calgary, AB T2T 5M9

### Books About Housing

---

Boddy, Trevor. *Modern Architecture in Alberta*. Regina: Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism and the Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1987.

Examines modern styles and their context in Alberta since 1925.

Dennis, Thelma B. *Albertans Built: Aspects of Housing in Rural Alberta to 1920*. Edmonton: University of Alberta Printing Services, 1986.

Studies pioneer and early settlement housing throughout the province.

Gowans, Alan. *The Comfortable House: North American Suburban Architecture 1890-1930*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986.

An illustrated survey of the principal styles used in North American houses.

Melnyk, Bryan. *Calgary Builds: The Emergence of an Urban Landscape 1905-1914*. Regina: Alberta Culture and the Canadian Plains Research Centre, 1985.

Contains a chapter on housing in Calgary and general information about the evolution of the urban landscape.

Ritchie, Thomas. *Canada Builds: 1867-1967*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967.

Contains historical information on construction technology and building practices in Canada.

Wetherell, Donald G. and Irene Kmet. *Homes in Alberta: Building, Trends, and Design 1870-1967*. Edmonton: Alberta Culture and Multiculturalism, Alberta Municipal Affairs and the University of Alberta Press, 1991.

A study of the social, political and economic history of Alberta's housing, as well as of house design and building practices in the province.

### Archives

---

The major institutions listed below, as well as smaller museums and archives throughout the province, may hold photographs and other information useful for researching the history of a house.

While archives staff cannot do research for individuals, anyone intending to carry out research at an out-of-town archives should write first to inquire about the sources that are available and any special conditions governing their use.

The major archives in the province are:

Canadian Architectural Archives,  
University Libraries, University of Calgary,  
2500 University Drive N.W., Calgary, AB  
T2N 1N4. Tel: 220-7420







City of Calgary Archives,  
313-7 Avenue S.E.,  
P.O. Box 2100, Postal Station M, Calgary, AB  
T2P 2M5. Tel: 268-8181

City of Lethbridge Archives,  
Upstairs, Sir Alexander Galt Museum,  
910-4 Avenue South, Lethbridge, AB  
T1J 0P6. Tel: 329-7302

City of Edmonton Archives,  
10440-108 Ave, Edmonton, AB  
T5H 3Z9. Tel: 496-8710

Glenbow Library and Archives,  
130-9 Avenue S.E., Calgary, AB  
T2G 0P3. Library Reference: 268-4197;  
Archives Reference: 268-4204

Medicine Hat Museum and Art Gallery  
Archives,  
1302 Bomford Crescent S.W.,  
Medicine Hat, AB  
T1A 5E6. Tel: 527-6266

Provincial Archives of Alberta,  
12845-102 Avenue, Edmonton, AB  
T5N 0M6. Tel: 427-1750

Red Deer and District Archives,  
4525-47 A Avenue,  
P.O. Box 800, Red Deer, AB  
T4N 5H2. Tel: 343-6842

Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies,  
Bear Street, P.O. Box 160, Banff, AB  
T0L 0C0. Tel: 762-2291

*The Alberta Archives Council Directory*  
(Calgary: The Alberta Archives Council, 1992)  
is a useful guide to Alberta's archives. It can be  
consulted at any of the archives listed here.

**Donald Wetherell** is an Edmonton consultant  
specializing in historical resources. With his  
partner, Irene Kmet, he has been involved in a  
variety of projects concerning Alberta's  
history, historical preservation, and the built  
environment. He has written various articles  
about the history of Alberta and prairie  
Canada, and, with Irene Kmet, is the author of  
*Useful Pleasures: The Shaping of Leisure in  
Alberta*, a history of recreational activities and  
leisure in Alberta. He and Ms. Kmet are also  
authors of *Homes in Alberta: Building, Trends  
and Design*, a history of house design, house  
construction technology, and social aspects of  
Alberta's housing history. Dr. Wetherell is a  
graduate of the University of Saskatchewan  
and Queen's University, Kingston, where he  
received his PhD in history. He has recently  
been appointed as the Senior Fellow,  
Historical Resources Intern Program,  
University of Calgary.

## Cataloguing in Publication Data

Wetherell, Donald G.  
How to research historic houses.

(Heritage notes. ISSN 1188-2115 ; no. 10)  
Bibliography: p. 11  
ISBN 0-7732-0873-9

1. Historic buildings - Research - Alberta - Handbooks,  
manuals, etc. 2. Dwellings - Research - Alberta -  
Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Alberta. Historic Sites and  
Archives Service. II. Alberta Historical Resources  
Foundation. III. Title. IV. Series

NA 7123.W47 1994 728.'097123

**Heritage Notes** are intended to provide guidance to the  
people of Alberta on a range of topics in the field of  
historic resource management. Readers' comments on the  
series are welcome. For more information or to order,  
please contact:  
Publications Co-ordinator, Old St. Stephen's College,  
8820 - 112 Street, Edmonton, Alberta Canada  
T6G 2P8 (403) 427-2022.

The *Heritage Notes* series is a joint production of the  
Alberta Historical Resources Foundation and Alberta  
Community Development.

*Unless otherwise credited, all photos and illustrations are  
the property of Alberta Community Development, Historic  
Sites and Archives Service.*

Printed in Canada 1994

Heritage Notes  
Co-ordinator  
Erna Dominey  
Technical Advisor  
Michael Payne  
Designer  
Eduard Wiens